(Foreign) Language against Forgetting

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Abstract:

"The Eighth Life: (For Brilka)" a novel by Nino Haratischvili (2014) and "Maybe Esther A Family Story" a memoir by Katja Petrowskaja (2014) are both German language works Both authors recount the passing on of memories and stories within a family over generations. In both stories, the family narrative is strongly influenced by the political events of 20th century world history. The personal confrontation with the consequences of the totalitarian regimes in Eastern and Western Europe proceeds differently in the families. Stalinism and Nazi dictatorship leave violent traces in the respective families but also in the individual biographies.

This paper will explore the question of how differently family history is passed on and how family stories, which are preserved in communicative memory and passed on orally (Welzer, 2011), relate to world history, which is stored in cultural memory (Assmann, A. 2018). "Families serve as a kind of switchboard between the individual memory and larger frames of collective remembrance. " (Erll 2011, p. 315).

In both books, however, the remembering, telling and (re)constructing of family histories is also contrasted with forgetting (Haratischvili) and silence (Petrovskaya). "The score of Forgetting" and the "Silence" in Katja Petrovskaya's family history create gaps that are filled by fictional stories. Language, also the "language of the mute", is the medium used to work against forgetting. Two different methods are shown of how language can function as a tool of emancipation and what functions language takes on in the individual, the familial and cultural memory. Notably, the works were not written in the mother tongue of the authors, but in German.

Keywords: Contemporary literature, Transgenerational Storytelling, Family Story, Foreign Language

"Maybe Esther" by Katja Petrowskaja (2014) and *"The Eighth Life (For Brilka)"*, by Nino Haratischwili, (2014), are two books which both tell a family story against the backdrop of totalitarianism in the 20th century. Both family stories are widely ramified and set in diverse European countries and cities. The following analyses these texts with a focus on the role of language and forgetting.

Large parts of both family stories are set in the Soviet Union (*Maybe Esther* in Russia, Ukraine, and Poland; *Eighth Life (For Brilka)* is set in Georgia, Russia, England, and Austria), thus telling a family story mainly on the communist side of the Iron Curtain. Both stories are told in German, although German is not the mother tongue of either of the authors. Katya Petrovskaya first learnt German at the age of 26, when she moved to Berlin:

> I started writing some texts and suddenly realised that I needed German. My addressee was a certain stereotypical resident of Prenzlauer-Berg (...), not even necessarily a German, but just a neighbour. I wanted to grab him and tell him what was actually unspoken. Some stories from our Soviet Moscow-Kiev childhood history (Buzko, 2020).

Böttinger (2014) sees in the change of language, which for him is also connected with the theme of the work, a historical anchoring of history, more precisely in literary history, in which there was an "Eastern European idiom [in which] German, Slavic and Jewish were mixed".

Weiss-Sussex (2020, p. 2) considers the fact that Katja Petrovskaya writes in German to underline the author's outsiderness:

> [S]he is writing to establish a relationship with a family past of which she has so far been unaware and to which she thus only marginally belongs. She is thus distancing herself from the Russian-speaking/Soviet culture she comes from and situates herself on the margins of German-language literature as well as of the Jewish culture that forms part of her family history. The freedom of perspective that comes with this position is, as I shall show, tangible in her text.

Language and the change of language are thematized in the review of the work. The complexity of the work is substantiated by its content and

finds expression in the change of languages and in the diversity of the story(s) told.

Nino Haratischwili also writes in German, not her native language either. However, she learnt German at an early age, at school in Georgia and then also attended school in Germany. She has a native-level proficiency in German. She describes why she decided to write in German:

> I wrote my first play in German. It was more for practical reasons because I wanted to stage a play of mine and I was quite fluent in German. I decided to write this play in German to not to be forced to translate it from Georgian into German. So somehow while writing in German I discovered that I really like this approach. I like this when it's not your native language. It's kind of more experimental, more playful, you always just think maybe I can do it in another way, I can do some other words. So, in your native language, you always do things kind of automatically, right and I have also been told, that my German is somehow Georgian. So, I think it's also something that is in me and with me and I have often been asked if I would write in Georgian if I went back, and I don't have an answer because my whole professional life as a writer started and continued in Germany in German (Haratischvili, 2019, 2:10 Min).

The two family stories presented here also have in common that they have found a wide audience both in Germany and throughout Europe, and have landed on bestseller lists and won several literature awards.[1]

Storytelling against forgetting

This paper asks what role (foreign) language plays in telling the family story against the background of forgetting.

When talking about foreign language, it is normally understood as foreign language in contrast to a non-foreign language, a native language, which can be understood naturally. Translational processes can occur bet-

[1] Katja Petrowskaja's work *"Maybe Esther"* was awarded the Ingeborg Bachmann Prize in 2013 and the aspekte Literature Prize for the complete work Vielleicht Esther in 2014. In 2015, the author received the Schubart Literature Prize. *"The Eighth Life (For Brilka)"* was nominated for the international Brooker Prize and received numerous awards in Germany.

ween these non-identical languages. The dissimilarity is based on the attribute 'foreign' that identifies the non-native language. It is therefore a question of how the story can be transferred into a comprehensible, own language with the help of translation processes on different levels. Different translation processes are to be looked at here, that work against forgetting.

Based on an extended translation process, translation can not only be seen as the transfer from one language to another. Homi Bhabha speaks of the fact that cultures themselves are fundamentally permeated by translation processes. Culture no longer appears as "original" but as hybrid, as impure, mixed layers of experience and meaning (Bhabha, 2012, pp. 54-55).

The aim is to show, as in the two books mentioned, how transmission processes between generations and transmission processes between languages are represented as hybrid and impure and what relevance these transmission processes have for the storytelling.

Family stories against forgetting

Family history always reflects a very personal part of general history. World history and family history are interwoven. Family histories are an "archive" and at the same time also a "communicator" of information. Maurice Halbwachs in "The collective memory" (Halbwachs, 1992) starts from the social function of memory and Jan Assmann (Assmann, 2018, p. 9). adds to these considerations by distinguishing between cultural and communicative memory. Cultural memory is a transgenerational long-term memory that stores and preserves supra-individual content over time. In contrast, the communicative memory is to be understood as the memory of approximately three generations, the contents of which are mostly transmitted orally within the family. Astrid Erll extends this consideration by speaking of a family memory, which she calls a "switchboard" (Erll, 2011, p. 315). Family memory is thus the link between communicative and cultural memory.

With regard to literature and the telling of transgenerational family stories, Aleida Assmann points out (Assmann, 2009, p. 59) that the number of family novels has increased since the 1990s. The "father novels", in which the second generation born after the Second World War deals with their fathers (and from the German perspective with their guilt in the Second World War), were replaced in the 1990s, according to Assmann, by family novels, in which continuity and the connection between the generations are empha-

sized and the family and its members appear as a chain. The individual a link in a chain of preceding individuals and sees him as a continuation of tradition and family history. Thus, within the family novels, a transgenerational translation process takes place. In the novel *"Maybe Esther"*, the question of truth and narratability is posed by means of a ficus benjamina. This plant is the central moment for the narrator, whereby its actual, real existence becomes irrelevant.

> What ficus? I don't remember any ficus. Suitcases, bundles, bags, crates. But a ficus? Papa, you did tell me about the ficus that was taken back down from the truck. Which ficus? I don't recall that. Maybe I forgot. I was fixated on that ficus, I was ficusated. I didn't understand how something like that could be forgotten. I didn't understand what must have happened to forget something like that. The ficus strikes me as the main character in the history, if not of the world, then of my family. In my version, the ficus saved my father's life. But if even my father can no longer remember the ficus, maybe it didn't really exist. When he told me about the evacuation, maybe I inserted the missing details into the blanks of the street. Did the ficus exist, or was it fiction? Was the fiction born from the ficus, or the other way around? I may never find out whether the ficus that saved my father ever existed at all (Petrowskaja, 2018, p. 194).

In "*Maybe Esther*", the transfer of a story from one generation to the next is accompanied by blanks and the question of truth. The implicit play on words between ficus and fiction is the key to intergenerational storytelling in Katja Petrowskaja's story. It is about the elaboration of stories in a temporal dimension, less about the actual search for truth. The storytelling works here against forgetting.

Similarly, to Katja Petrowskaja, Nino Haratischwili's story is about continuing to tell the story, to take up the thread again, and to spin it further. Here, too, the criterion is not true/untrue, but to elaborate and tell the individual threads/stories that together make a whole. The Ficus benjamina in Petrovskaya's story, which is the pivot around the narration, is the carpet from the family property in Haratischwili's story. The question of how the individual parts of the story, the individual threads, make a whole and how

history is connected with the present and the future, shows Haratishwili by writing about the material family heritage, a carpet.

> What does restored mean? I asked. I stopped in front of her, fascinated. I'm going to make the old carpet new again and hang it on the wall. The carpet belonged to our grandmother, and Christine inherited it. She never liked it., so she gave it to me, but I never appreciated it either, not until I was old. It's a very ancient, very valuable tapestry. 'You can't do that, can you, make something old new?' 'Of course you can. The old thing will become new, so it'll be different, never quite what it used to be, but that's not the point of the exercise. It's better and more interesting when something transforms itself. We'll make it new, hang it up, and see what happens.' 'But what for?' I wanted to know. 'A carpet is a story. And hidden within it are countless other stories. Come here, be careful, take my hand, yes, that's it. Now look; do you see the pattern?' I stared at the colourful ornamentation on the red background. 'Those are all individual threads. And each individual thread is an individual story. Do you understand what I'm saying?' (Haratischvili, 2019, p. 31).

It becomes evident in Katya Petrovskaya's novel that it is precisely the linguistic form of the story, the family story, that is at stake. By telling the story in German, the narrator alludes to the etymology of the word "German" in Russian. "German" "Nemeckij" are those who cannot speak. Those who have no language. The narrator's family has been teaching deaf-mute children for generations, teaching them sign language. A language that frees them from muteness and with which they can communicate.

> I threw myself into the study of German as though carrying on the battle against muteness, because German, *nemetskiy*, is, in Russian, the language of the mute. The Germans are the mute*, nemoy nemets*; the German cannot speak at all. For me, this German was a divining rod in the search for my family members who had taught deaf-mute children how to speak over the course of centuries, as though I had to learn the mute German so that I could speak, and this desire was inexplicable even to me (Petrowskaja, 2018, pp. 17-18).

In the story of *"Maybe Esther"* the sign language and German play a significant role. Russian is the unmarked language; against whose background the story is told. However, the family story finds expression only in the written German, which, like sign language, is a visual language, without melody, intonation and further linguistic expression.

Transmission of history, however, also takes place in the novel *"The Eighth Life (For Brilka)"* through a change of media. The importance of dance is alluded to again and again. Dance here is a physical form of expression, which, however, as indicated here, consists in a pas des deux in an interplay of partners.

> I owe these lines to a century that cheated and deceived everyone, all those who hoped. I owe these lines to an enduring betrayal that settled over my family like a curse. I owe these lines to my sister, whom I could never forgive for flying away that night without wings; to my grandfather, whose heart my sister tore out; to my great-grandmother, who at the age of eighty-threedanced a pas de deux with me; to my mother, who went off in search of God… I owe these lines to Miro, who infected me with love as if it were poison; I owe these lines to my father, whom I never really got to know; I owe these lines to a chocolate-maker and a White-Red Lieutenant; to a prison cell; to an operating table in the middle of a classroom; to a book I would never have written, if … I owe these lines to an infinite number of fallen tears, I owe these lines to myself, a woman who left home to find herself and gradually lost herself instead; but, above all, I owe these lines to you, Brilka (Haratischvili, 2019, pp. 17-18).

In this quotation, the structure of the sentences can be understood as a dance. The parallel structure of the sentences: I owe these lines to.... also shows a linearity, as it is supposed to be produced by the narration. The parallel structure of the sentences also ties in with the image of the carpet that is to be reconstructed. The dance and the weaving of the threads into a (new whole) text can also be seen as a story.

Conclusion

It emerges clearly that in both transgenerational narratives the family represents a contact zone. A contact zone between the older and the younger generation. This contact zone enables encounters that are always accompanied by translation processes.

In "*Maybe Esther"*, translation processes are not directly between the languages, but between the different generations, which are defined by the respective language.

In the novel *"The Eighth Life (for Brilka)"*, the translation processes are not between languages, but between generations, which, like the carpet, are connected to each other by individual threads and stories.

By telling the stories, they are saved from oblivion. The stories are expressed in German, which is not the mother tongue of either of the authors, becomes a vehicle through its foreignness. The transfer of the family stories from the past into the present of the authors and the further transfer into the foreign language are strategies of how the foreign language saves the stories from being forgotten. The languages of the authors, the newly acquired and the mother tongue, as well as the variety of translations within the stories show that the stories can be told through the foreign language in particular, thus resisting forgetting.

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